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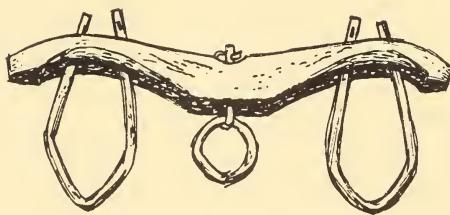
Robert L. Kincaid.
The Speaker.

Abraham Lincoln:

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN: THE SPEAKER

ROBERT L. KINCAID*

Abraham Lincoln's claim to greatness lies principally in his statesmanship in a critical period in the life of our nation. In analyzing that greatness, it is easy to break it down into its component parts and consider different phases of his lasting fame. We often hear much about Lincoln the lawyer, Lincoln the story-teller, Lincoln the humorist, Lincoln the writer, Lincoln the politician, or Lincoln the humanitarian. So it is that many students of this great American have also considered him as one of the great orators of modern times.

It is appropriate for this gathering to discuss Lincoln the speaker. Although he never attended college a day in his life, or, so far as we know, took a single lesson in elocution, he attained such distinction as a speaker during his public career, he could most worthily have become a member of the Tau Kappa Alpha.

In considering Lincoln's forensic abilities, we find a difference of opinion among many students of his career. Lord Curzon, in a course of lectures at the University of Cambridge in 1913, stated that the three masterpieces of modern oratory in the English language were the toast of William Pitt after Trafalgar, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and Lincoln's Second Inaugural. William Jennings Bryan in his eulogy of Lincoln in 1909 rated the Great Emancipator as one of the outstanding orators in American history. Yet, others claim that Lincoln was an inferior performer on the platform. It was granted that he could make an effective stump speech and could present impressive, logical arguments that commanded attention, but as a finished orator, many students have felt he was a second rate figure. This, of course, does not take into account the fact that his major

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speeches during the later years of his life are now recognized at literary masterpieces.

This difference of opinion as to Lincoln's ability as an orator probably stems from the fact that he was tall, ungainly, awkward, and spoke with a rather high-pitched voice. It has been said that he often began his speeches with apparent reserve and shyness, that his gestures were not polished, and that his voice was not too pleasing. However, when he warmed to his subject he was usually able to work his hearers into a fervor of enthusiasm. Lincoln may not have had the fire of a Patrick Henry; he may not have spoken with the rolling cadences of a Daniel Webster, the impassioned eloquence of a Henry Clay, the poetic beauty of Robert G. Ingersoll, or the magnificent flourishes of a William Jennings Bryan; but it must be granted that he had tremendous power as a speaker and his spoken words produced a lasting effect upon his audience, which, after all, is the mark of the great orator.

John G. Nicolay, one of Lincoln's secretaries, made this appraisal of Lincoln's power as a speaker:

He talks fluently, uses good strong Saxon, and avoids all attempts at display and affectations of any kind. His voice is strong and clear, and his articulation is singularly perfect.

Robert G. Ingersoll had this to say of Lincoln:

If you wish to know the difference between an orator and an elocutionist — between what is felt and what is said — between what the heart and brain can do together and what the brain can do alone — read Lincoln's wondrous words at Gettysburg, and then the speech of Edward Everett. The oration of Lincoln will never be forgotten. It will live until languages are dead and lips are dust. The speech of Everett will never be read. The elocutionists believe in the virtue of voice, the sublimity of syntax, the majesty of long sentences, and the genius of gesture. The orator loves the real, the simple, the natural. He places the thought above all.

What were the secrets of this forensic ability of Abraham Lincoln? I do not believe that it was the magnetism of the born orator, as we think of natural oratory. He did not make a commanding and impressive physical appearance which over-powered his listeners by

the sheer force of his personality. A writer in 1861 gave this description of the man who was entering the White House:

To say he is ugly is nothing; to add that his figure is grotesque is to convey no adequate impression. Fancy a man well over six feet high, and thin in proportion, with long bony arms and legs which somehow always seem to be in the way; with great rugged furrowed hands, which grasp you like a vise when shaking yours; with a long, scraggly neck, and a chest too narrow for the great arms at his side. Add to this figure a head, cocoanut shaped and somewhat too small for such a stature, covered with rough, uncombed hair that stands out in every direction at once; a face furrowed, wrinkled, and indented as though it had been scarred by vitriol; a high, narrow forehead, sunk beneath bushy eyebrows; two bright, somewhat dreamy eyes that seem to gaze through you without looking at you; . . . a close-set, thin-lipped stern mouth, with two rows of large white teeth, and a nose and ears which have been taken by mistake from a head twice the size. Clothe this figure, then, in a long, tight, badly-fitting suit of black. . . . Add to all this an air of strength, physical as well as moral, and a strange look of dignity . . . and you have the impression left on me by Abraham Lincoln.

So it seems to me in thinking of Lincoln as an orator, it was not *how* Lincoln spoke, but *what* he said and the measured beauty of his phrases which made him a power on the platform. We who try to develop effective public speech should be able to get some valuable lessons from this self-trained oratorical genius.

Lincoln's development as a youth was much like that of any frontier lad. He attended the public schools less than a year in his life, and his education, which he listed as "defective" in the Congressional Directory of 1846, was that which he received from his own extensive reading. He mastered a number of books during his boyhood. He read the Bible, Shakespeare, "Pilgrim's Progress," The Statutes of Indiana, Weems' "Life of Washington," Aesop's Fables, and other biographies and textbooks which he was able to borrow from neighbors.

Whether he aspired to be a public speaker while he was growing up is not known. It is believed, however, that on the wilderness frontier in Indiana during his teen-age period, he memorized poems and extracts from public speeches, which he probably declaimed in the Indiana woods. There is no evidence of his having made a public

speech prior to the time he was a candidate for the Illinois Legislature in 1832. We have what is believed to be the text of that first speech when he offered himself for public office. It was not unlike that of any other youthful speech which might have been made by any young man of 23, and certainly in it we can see no evidence of greatness which he would attain. Here is what he said:

Fellow Citizens, I presume you all know who I am — I am humble Abraham Lincoln. I have been solicited by many friends to become a candidate for the Legislature. My politics are short and sweet, like the old woman's dance. I am in favor of a national bank. I am in favor of the internal improvement system and a high protective tariff. These are my sentiments and political principles. If elected I shall be thankful; if not it will be all the same.

That was Abraham Lincoln at the age of 23. Would you give him "A" for "effort?"

Let us see his development in the next six years. Lincoln had gained some experience in the Illinois Legislature and had been admitted to the Illinois Bar. Note the maturity and improvement in one of his speeches made when he was 29 years of age:

Let every American, every lover of liberty, every well-wisher to his posterity swear by the blood of the Revolution never to violate in the least particular the laws of the country, and never to tolerate their violation by others. As the patriots of seventy-six did to the support of the Declaration of Independence, so to the support of the Constitution and laws let every American pledge his life, his property, and his sacred honor — let every man remember that to violate the law is to trample on the blood of his father, and to tear the charter of his own and his children's liberty. Let reverence for the laws be breathed by every American mother to the lisping babe that prattles on her lap; let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges; let it be written in primers, spelling-books, and in almanacs; let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay of all sexes and tongues and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars.

An examination of the address from which this extract is taken

reveals a remarkable maturity of thought and is indicative of Lincoln's ability to turn phrases and build to a climax. This early speech may be considered "sophomoric" in performance; however, it indicates his remarkable use of words and his ability to coin polished and balanced phrases. Lincoln as an effective speaker had arrived at the age of 29.

With the delivery of this speech in 1838 begins the decade of Lincoln's emergence as a successful lawyer. Except for his normal activity in the Presidential and local campaign in Illinois, Lincoln's experience as a speaker was in connection with his law practice. He became recognized as an able pleader before juries. He learned all the tricks of the trade in winning cases. He was a superb story-teller and used in his pleadings much of the vernacular and the language of the frontier. He never assumed a pompous attitude but kept his discourse on a common level to appeal to his audiences.

His one term in Congress, from 1846-1848, did not distinguish him as a great speaker in that forum. He made few speeches which attracted attention. But he was particularly adroit in his castigation of General Cass in the Presidential campaign of 1848. He used humor and satire in this major address, which he later felt might have been a little unfair to the General. A portion of this address is indicative of his method of holding a political opponent up to ridicule:

By the way, Mr. Speaker, did you know I am a military hero? Yes, sir; in the days of the Black Hawk war I fought, bled, and came away. Speaking of General Cass's career reminds me of my own. I was not at Stillman's defeat, but I was about as near it as Cass was to Hull's surrender; and, like him, I saw the place very soon afterward. It is quite certain I did not break my sword, for I had none to break; but I bent a musket pretty badly on one occasion. If Cass broke his sword, the idea is he broke it in desperation; I bent the musket by accident. If General Cass went in advance of me in picking huckleberries, I guess I surpassed him in charges upon the wild onions. If he saw any live, fighting Indians, it was more than I did; but I had a good many bloody struggles with the mosquitoes, and although I never fainted from the loss of blood, I can truly say I was often very hungry. Mr. Speaker, if I should ever conclude to doff whatever our Democratic friends may suppose there is of black-cockade federalism about me, and therefore they shall take me up as their candidate for the presidency, I protest they shall not make fun of me, as they have of General Cass, by attempting to write me into a military hero.

This decade of Lincoln's development was not marked by any profound pronouncements on the slavery question, which was so seriously agitating the country at the time. Lincoln's emergence as a great orator dates from 1854, when he made a memorable speech in Peoria, October 6, of that year. This was his first major attack upon the position of Senator Douglas as the leader of the Illinois Democrats.

Lincoln was replying to a speech made previously by Douglas in Springfield, and it pitched the scale of his forensic battle with Douglas, which was to continue through the famous Debates of 1858. This Peoria speech showed the maturity of Lincoln as a political leader and as an impassioned advocate of the final extinction of slavery. The closing paragraph of the speech reveals the lofty attitude of Lincoln in dealing with the slavery problem and in appealing for a new dedication to the spirit of the principles announced in the Declaration of Independence:

Our republican robe is soiled and trailed in the dust. Let us repurify it. Let us turn and wash it white in the spirit, if not the blood of the Revolution. Let us turn slavery from its claims of "moral right" back upon its existing legal rights and its arguments of "necessity." Let us return it to the position our fathers gave it, and there let it rest in peace. Let us readopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it the practices and policy which harmonize with it. Let North and South — let all Americans — let all lovers of liberty everywhere join in the great and good work. If we do this, we shall not only have saved the Union, but we shall have so saved it as to make and to keep it forever worthy of the saving. We shall have so saved it that the succeeding millions of free, happy people, the world over, shall rise up and call us blessed to the latest generation.

You will note a similarity of expression in this portion of his address of 1854 with the extract I quoted from his speech of 1838. Also, the last sentence is but a different expression of the same sentiment which he gave in some of his presidential addresses.

It will not be possible for me to sketch Lincoln's memorable Debates with Douglas in the Illinois Senatorial campaign of 1858. You remember that Lincoln delivered his famous "House Divided" speech at the Republican Convention June 16, 1858, when he became a candidate for the U. S. Senate. His first statement in that address has

often been quoted. Around that statement and Douglas's support of the popular sovereignty principle was the main theme of the seven great Debates which followed. Let us quote that statement:

If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do, and how to do it. We are now far into the fifth year since a policy was initiated with the avowed object and confident promise of putting an end to slavery agitation. Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not ceased but has constantly augmented. In my opinion, it will not cease until a crisis shall have been reached and passed. 'A house divided against itself cannot stand.' I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved — I do not expect the house to fall — but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward till it shall become alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new, North as well as South.

Professional historians who have made an exhaustive analysis of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates usually arrive at the conclusion that Douglas, with his popular sovereignty principle, was on sound ground from the standpoint of the democratic method of solving a political question; but that Lincoln came out the victor, because he took his position on the high moral principle that human slavery was wrong, should be contained, and ultimately abolished. Although Douglas won the Senatorial race, Lincoln, in his position, became the recognized leader in the West in the moral crusade to abolish slavery. For the first time in his public career, Lincoln had risen to national stature and was ready for the new role he was to play in the Presidential campaign of 1860.

Much has been said about Lincoln's subsequent Cooper Institute speech made in New York City February 27, 1860. It has been ranked as one of his greatest pieces of political argumentation. For the first time he was being heard by important political leaders in the east. They were enthralled by his eloquence, his logic, his sincerity, and his high statesmanship. His speech was a fitting climax to the same solid argument and exalted humanitarian view which he expressed so eloquently in his Debates with Douglas. Just as William

Jennings Bryan in later years won his nomination to the Presidency by his electrifying "Cross of Gold" speech, so this Cooper Institute address brought Lincoln to the Presidency of the United States.

The First and Second Inaugural addresses of Lincoln, his Gettysburg Address, and other important pronouncements made during the Civil War, are so well known it is not necessary to elaborate upon his continued growth as a compelling orator and a master of superb English. These addresses have become part and parcel of the literary heritage of America. They are studied and declaimed in every public school in the land. They are recited by speakers throughout the world in describing the greatness of our democratic heritage. Magnificent in sentiment, poetic in beauty, and immortal in expression, they will endure for all time as the noblest utterances coming from the heart of a great patriot.

I have often wondered if Lincoln's first inaugural address could have been broadcast to the nation, and the Southern people could have felt the warmth and sincerity of his appeal to "the better angels of [their] nature," perhaps the horrors of the Civil War could have been avoided. Listen to his closing remarks in that address:

In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in heaven to destroy the government, while I shall have the most solemn one to 'preserve, protect, and defend it.'

I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

Lincoln's profound humility was one of his noblest attributes. But he had a clear perspective of the historical importance of the events in which he found himself. His appeal to Congressional leaders on December 1, 1862, is like the voice of our ancient prophet:

Fellow-citizens, we cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance or insignificance can spare one

or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass will light us down, in honor or in dishonor, to the latest generation. We say we are for the Union. The world will not forget that we say this. We know how to save the Union. The world knows we do know how to save it. We — even we here — hold the power and bear the responsibility. In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free — honorable alike in what we give and what we preserve. We shall nobly save or meanly lose the last, best hope of earth.

Lincoln gave us in his short second inaugural address an intimate glimpse into his great heart. Victory was near, but there was no exultation, no pride of triumph, no touch of vindictiveness. His closing words set the pattern for all who struggle for freedom and peace.

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in: to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan — to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.

Why is the Gettysburg Address regarded as one of the greatest addresses of all time? It is not because it is brief. It is not because of its simple, stately, and poetic language. It is rather because it encompasses the universal prayer of mankind for individual liberty. It uses the time and occasion of a critical period in history to proclaim an eternal principle. It is Lincoln at his best in expressing the overpowering passion of his own heart and in giving voice to the common mass of humanity who ever seek to be free. His dedicatory call shall forever ring down through the centuries:

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us — that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

We began this discussion by talking about "Lincoln the Speaker." How inadequate the term! As we have quoted from his familiar addresses, and have watched the growth of his mind and the unfold-

ing of his devotion to his country, we have become subdued and silent in the presence of his immortal spirit. That is the magic spell of his matchless oratory. That attests the power and greatness of his words. Men live, serve their generations for a few short years, then pass into oblivion. It is the cycle of life for all of us. It is the same with Lincoln. But when his countless monuments in bronze and stone have crumbled away, his words and deeds shall be remembered and cherished by free men "down to the latest generation."

More than a speaker, more than an orator, more than a statesman, more than a prophet, Lincoln is immortal because he gave eloquent expression to the highest ideals of the human heart in seeking to preserve and maintain a government among men which he believed would give to mankind the fullest opportunity for individual growth, happiness, and freedom. That is the greatness of Abraham Lincoln.

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